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Military Region 1



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VIETNAM

The government has abandoned Quang Tri Province, following a series of large-scale communist attacks.

A large North Vietnamese force, supported by tanks, on Wednesday attacked government outposts along Route 1 in eastern Quang Tri Province. The region commander had pulled out most of his regulars the previous day, and South Vietnamese regional forces reportedly gave up their positions after only token resistance. The local commander hopes to rally his troops and make a stand at the My Chanh River, which separates Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. The government built extensive defenses in this area after the cease-fire in 1973.

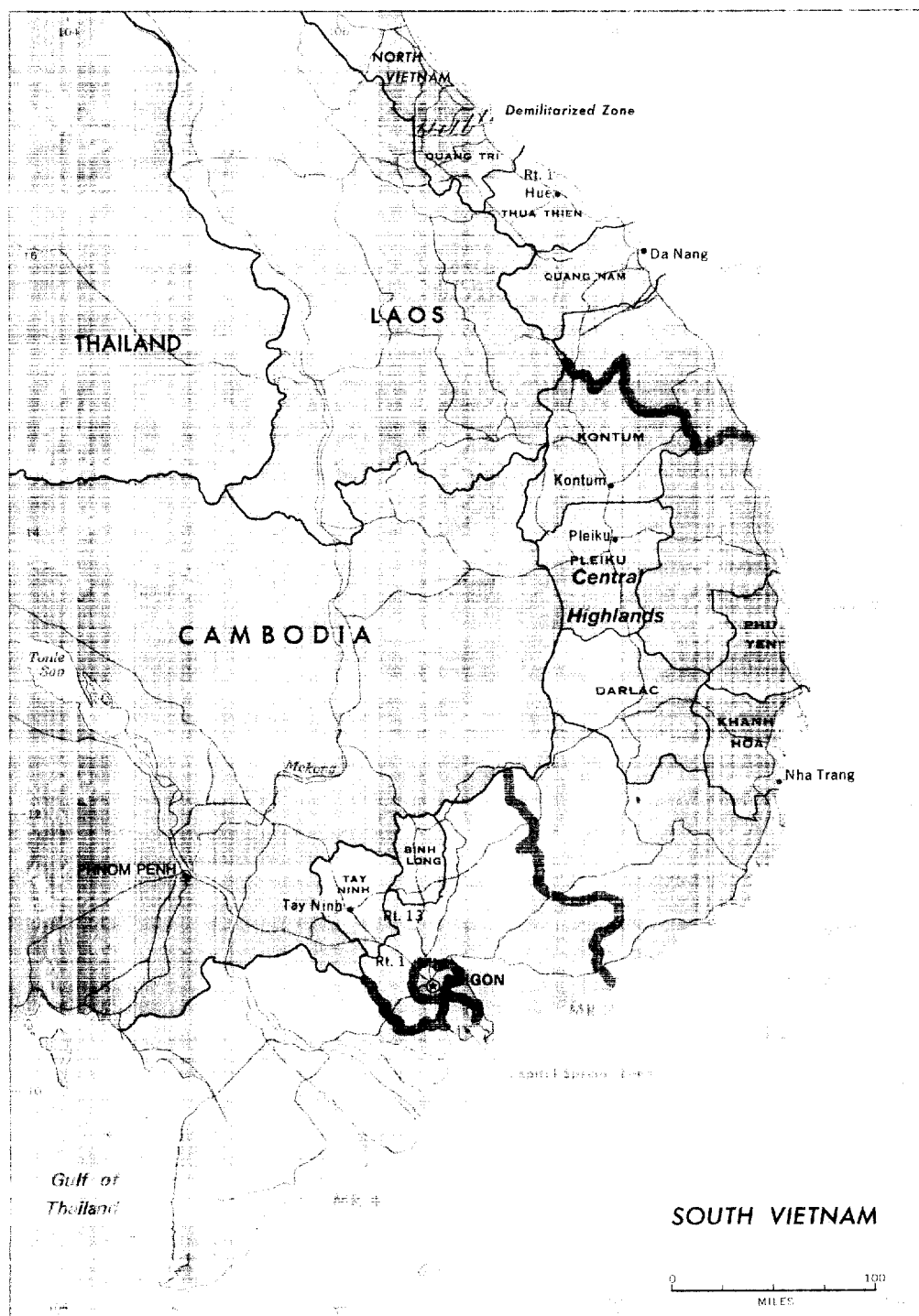
The commander has also ordered the evacuation of civilians from Quang Tri Province. Except for a few thousand civilians who have relatives living in communist-held areas of the province, the evacuation was nearly completed by Wednesday evening. Most of the refugees are going to Hue.

The government is realigning its remaining forces in Thua Thien and Quang Nam provinces. A ranger group, supported by tanks and artillery, holds positions just south of the My Chanh River. The South Vietnamese 1st Division is located on the high ground along Route 1 between the Bo River and the Hai Van Pass, and the one remaining marine brigade in Thua Thien Province occupies defenses just south of Hue.

The local commander already had shifted several of his marine brigades south for the defense of Da Nang and the lowlands of eastern Quang Nam Province. Preliminary reporting indicates the South Vietnamese are now moving much of their heavy artillery and armor from Hue to Da Nang. The lost firepower will make it difficult to defend Hue.

The communists have more than two full divisions supported by armor, artillery, and air defense units in the Hue area. Recent reporting clearly indicates the North Vietnamese plan to attack the city during March.

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In the central highlands, the government military convoy from Kontum and Pleiku cities has reached a river in central Phu Yen Province but is having difficulty crossing because a bridge is out. So far, the column has not been harassed by communist forces, but there are reports that North Vietnamese units are moving into the area to attack the column.

Remnants of the South Vietnamese 23rd Division have reached western Khanh Hoa Province, but it is not yet clear how much of the division will get out of Darlac Province. An airborne brigade, which was to have been brought in from Military Region 1, will be moved into western Khanh Hoa to hold a strategic mountain pass and block the communists from moving into the lowlands.

North of Saigon, government troops are proceeding with the evacuation of Binh Long Province. Several units and a dozen 105-mm. howitzers were to be flown out by today, and other units will attempt to move south on Route 13. South Vietnamese forces are destroying weapons and ammunition stocks that they have had to leave behind.

Communist units are maintaining heavy pressure on government positions in Tay Ninh Province, and South Vietnamese units have made little progress in their drive to push enemy troops away from Route 1 in the southern part of the province. A recent rallier has reported that communist units, including the 3rd and 5th divisions, have been ordered to capture Tay Ninh City during the current offensive. So far, the communists have not made a frontal assault on the city.

* * * *

Although the communists initially did not block the flight of refugees from the highlands and other areas being evacuated by government forces, they now seem to be threatening to stop such a mass escape by civilians. The Viet Cong's Liberation Radio has issued an appeal to "compatriots" in the central highlands to stay in their homelands and "build a new life." The communists regularly make such appeals to encourage popular defections

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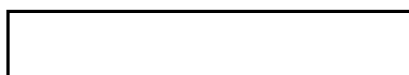
to their side, but this is the first such broadcast since the government began withdrawing from the central highlands. Although the broadcast specifically cites only the current exodus from the central highlands, it presumably applies countrywide.

The broadcast also requested "compatriots" to coordinate their actions with members of the "people's army" to be ready to "cope with Thieu's trick of compelling people to evacuate." This phraseology means that members of the Viet Cong's political apparatus will work with North Vietnamese main-force units to prevent further widespread movements of people out of the newly "liberated" areas.

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UK

The Wilson government's decision to grant a visa to Aleksandr Shelepin, former head of the KGB and now head of the Soviet labor organization, has aroused a storm of protest in Britain. A letter of protest against his coming has been signed by 104 members of Parliament.

Shelepin is scheduled to lead a delegation of Soviet labor officials that has been invited by the Trades Union Congress to visit Britain next month. The congress had extended the invitation to labor officials, not to Shelepin personally. Many union officials are now having second thoughts about the visit.

Shelepin's expected arrival raises a number of problems for the British government. These include:

--The treatment he should be accorded. One Foreign Office official has said that Shelepin would be received as a labor leader and not as a leading party figure. Prime Minister Wilson, who has been trying to improve relations with the Soviets, must decide whether to meet Shelepin.

--The problem of ensuring his security. A number of anti-Soviet emigré and Jewish groups are almost certain to organize protest demonstrations. The Soviet delegation will include at least six security agents, and the question has arisen as to whether the agents should be allowed to carry guns. They could be granted temporary firearms certificates, but many Britons would be opposed to allowing known KGB officials to carry weapons.

Moscow originally regarded Shelepin's visit as part of its effort to improve relations with the UK, exemplified by Wilson's trip to the USSR last month. In addition, the visit would enhance the respectability of the USSR's controlled labor unions in their contacts with Western labor organizations. The uproar over Shelepin may now cause the Soviets to reconsider the desirability of having him go. On the other hand, they would be reluctant to appear to be knuckling under to British public opinion.

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PORTUGAL

The 24-man Revolutionary Council has announced a two-week delay in the constituent assembly election. It will now be held on April 25, the anniversary of the overthrow of the Caetano regime by the Armed Forces Movement; the electoral campaign, due to begin today, was put off until April 2.

A statement by the Communications Ministry on Tuesday had hinted that the election might be postponed from the scheduled date of April 12--not because of recent political turmoil but because of "technical problems."

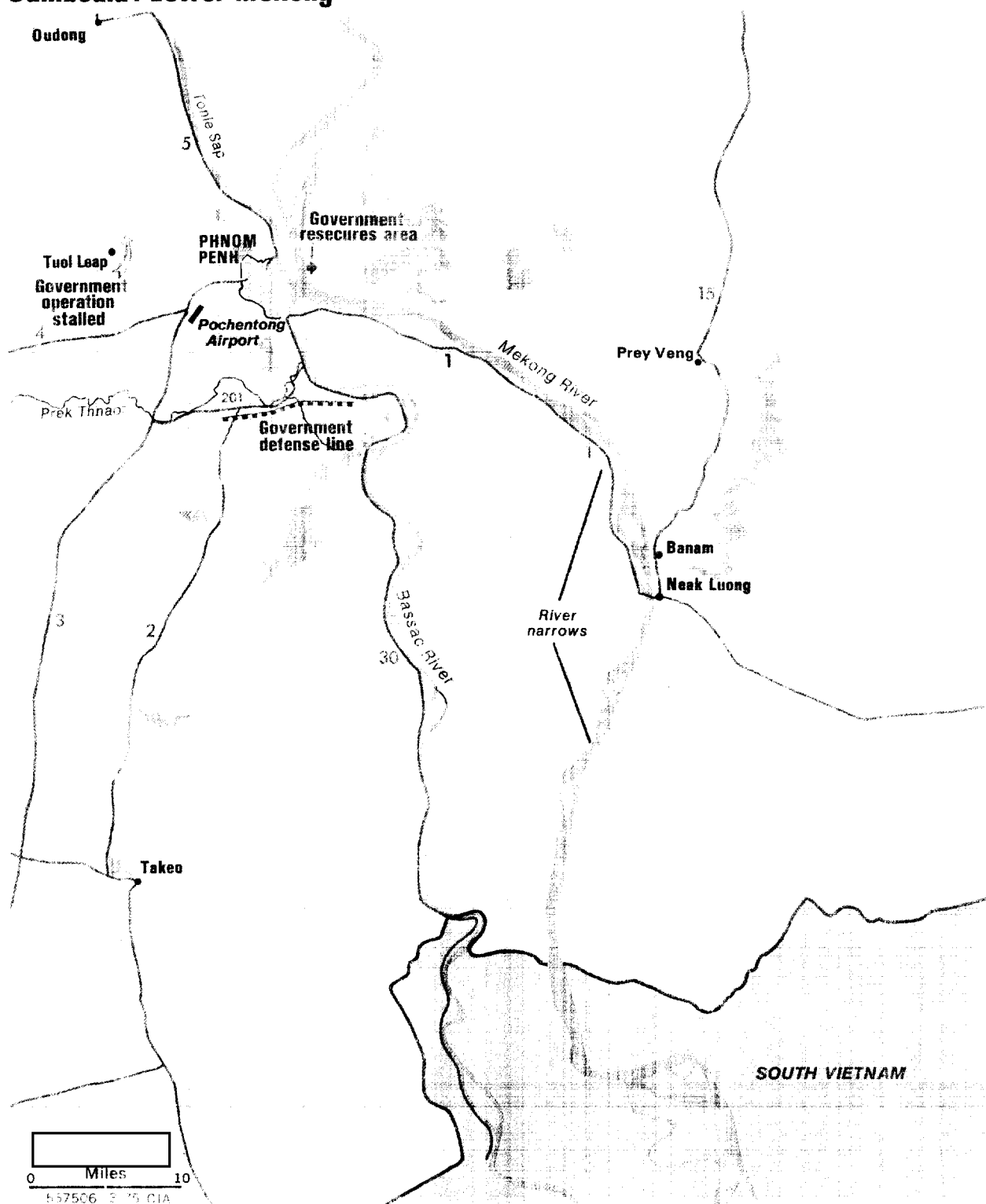
The Council indicated that disagreement among political parties over party symbols to be printed on the ballots had caused the delay. The Communists reportedly are afraid that the use of variations of the hammer and sickle by extreme left-wing groups might confuse Communist voters.

When the Armed Forces Movement assumed power, it promised an election for a constituent assembly within a year. Another postponement, however, would indicate that the Movement does not intend to hold elections at all.

In a related development, the government increased its control over the election by removing the 14 political party representatives from the National Electoral Commission, leaving 14 government and military officials to oversee the election. A Popular Democratic Party leader has told a US embassy official that the move might turn out for the best, however, because vocal representatives of the extreme left were holding up the work of the commission.

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Cambodia: Lower Mekong

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CAMBODIA

Khmer communist gunners continue to pound the Mekong River towns of Neak Luong and Banam with heavy artillery, mortar, and recoilless rifle fire. An ammunition dump at Neak Luong was hit and exploded yesterday. The navy plans to withdraw all vessels from Neak Luong as soon as the barricade across the river to the northeast can be destroyed.

In the Phnom Penh area yesterday, government clearing operations northeast of Tuol Leap lost momentum. Nine rockets landed at Pochentong airport--three struck Cambodian air force facilities, damaging one aircraft. The fighting is inconclusive on most other fronts around the city, except along the Mekong where government units forced insurgent troops to withdraw from an area directly opposite the Phnom Penh waterfront.

[REDACTED] The communists presumably hope to force the government to withdraw troops from the more active battlefronts to the north in order to reinforce the southeastern approaches to the city.

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THAILAND

Khukrit Pramot's proposed coalition won a vote of confidence in the National Assembly yesterday, ending a seven-week-long effort to form a government. The vote was 140 to 124 in favor of Khukrit.

The new government is essentially conservative and most of its members, including Prime Minister Khukrit, are basically sympathetic to maintaining close ties with the US. Nevertheless, in response to pressures from members of the National Assembly and the press, Khukrit has gone on record as favoring a one-year timetable for the withdrawal of US forces. He has also stated that he would find it extremely difficult, given the political climate in Thailand, to undo the recent cabinet decision to revoke the tin-mining concession of a joint US-Dutch firm. Moreover, the political ambitions of Foreign Minister Chatchai are likely to provide new irritants to Thai-US relations.

Khukrit's new government is likely to be unstable.

It rests on the tenuous cooperation of seven political parties, most of which are politically more conservative than Khukrit.

The new cabinet is representative of Thailand's vested interests. It is composed largely of businessmen and retired police and military officials, and its heavily conservative make-up is clearly out of step with Khukrit's more liberal views. Strains are likely to be aggravated by Khukrit's arrogant manner. Such cabinet members as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Praman, who owns much of Thailand's textile industry, may prove less responsive than was the Sanya caretaker government to pressure groups demanding social, economic, and political reforms. The new government could, therefore, become an early target of attack by student activists, intellectuals, and the press.

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USSR-CHINA

The Soviet government has "recently" sought the release of the three Soviet crew members taken captive when their helicopter went down in China a year ago, according to a Radio Moscow commentary of last Saturday. This is the first indication of Soviet efforts on behalf of the crew since a broadcast reported an approach by Soviet Ambassador Tolstikov to the Chinese government in mid-October.

Moscow is clearly frustrated and embarrassed by the continued Chinese refusal to return the crew members. The Soviets have claimed that the crew lost its way during a humanitarian mission, while Peking has accused the Soviets of espionage. The Radio Moscow commentator said Peking is guilty of "provocative" behavior and of resorting to "falsifications and distortions of the true facts" in dealing with the case. The commentator said Moscow "is doing and will do everything possible" to obtain the release of the crew members. There was no hint of any intention to use force, an intimation that occasionally appeared in private Soviet statements last year.

Peking's intransigence suggests that the Chinese may still have not decided what to do with the crew. There has been a good deal of speculation, some of it fed by Chinese diplomats abroad, that Peking would put the men on trial. Senior Chinese spokesmen, however, have never gone beyond the vague statement that the case would be handled in accordance with "Chinese law."

Complicating Peking's handling of the issue is the fact that Sino-Soviet relations may have become enmeshed in Chinese politics. There are signs that Mao himself is concerned that his successors will backslide and temper Peking's hostility toward Moscow.

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CHINA

Peking announced yesterday that it would grant amnesty to nearly 300 Nationalist "war criminals" currently in custody. This is a move clearly designed to emphasize to both Taipei and Washington Peking's peaceful intentions for Taiwan's reunification with the mainland.

The announcement was probably also intended to underscore to the US Peking's desire for a negotiated, rather than a military, settlement of the Taiwan matter. The Chinese have acknowledged that a solution may be some time in coming, but they have also indicated recently a desire for further progress.

The Chinese have for some time been emphasizing their conciliatory policy toward the bulk of Taiwan's population. At ceremonies commemorating the anniversary of the 1947 uprising on Taiwan last month, the principal speaker noted that on Taiwan "the patriots are many and the traitors are few." He called for increased contact between the mainland and Taiwan.

In the announcement yesterday, the Chinese pointed directly to the connection between the amnesty and Peking's appeal to "compatriots" on Taiwan by noting that the amnesty would promote "the patriotic struggle of the people in Taiwan against the Chiang Kai-shek clique." In the past few years, Peking has urged Taiwan residents to visit relatives on the mainland and has guaranteed their safe return home. The clear message is that, with a few exceptions, Peking will not mistreat either the mainlanders or the Taiwanese after the "liberation" of the island.

According to the Chinese announcement, the pardoned "war criminals" include more than 200 Nationalist military men, 21 Kuomintang and Nationalist government officials, and 50 "secret agents." It was announced that those pardoned would be given the choice of remaining in China with full citizenship rights or "returning to Taiwan."

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Although Peking almost certainly intended this latest move as an invitation to further communications with Taipei, there is very little likelihood that Taiwan will respond. Taipei's position in recent months on the possibility of negotiations with Peking appears to be as hard as ever, and the Nationalists will probably view as a provocation Peking's offer to repatriate some of the pardoned "criminals" to Taiwan.

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FRANCE

Paris is looking for ways to increase its cooperation with NATO, although very limited steps appear to have been taken thus far.

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Giscard is known to have a more open attitude toward cooperation with NATO than his predecessors, but he clearly is not prepared to move toward actual re-entry

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of French forces into the Alliance's integrated command. His government, however, has been showing interest in several NATO activities. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Paris is studying ways of tying its communications system into the NATO network. The French also participated recently in the Alliance's communications committee, although they will not be able to vote until they actually enter the NATO network.

The French NATO representative has said that he wants to participate in SHAPEX 75, an Alliance exercise that will involve a symposium on basic problems of the organization. While the French have not previously participated in this exercise, they have taken part in other, more significant exercises. The government has also allowed US forces in Europe to use training areas in southern France, despite domestic criticism.

The possibility of French participation in NATO's Eurogroup has also been raised again, this time in a brief statement by a French Socialist Party official that appeared early this month in Le Monde. Rumors that France was about to join the Eurogroup have been circulating for at least a year and have consistently been denied by the French government. Under Pompidou, the French allegedly were motivated by the desire to lay the groundwork for an exclusively European defense force; under Giscard, it reportedly has been the price for securing a part of the future West European arms market.

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TURKEY

President Koruturk yesterday designated Justice Party leader Suleyman Demirel to try to form a government. Demirel's center-right Nationalist Front, which consists of four parties, falls just 6 votes short of the 226 needed for a majority in Parliament, but he may be able to pick up additional support from dissident members of the Democratic Party.

Earlier in the day, former prime minister Ecevit turned down a chance to form a government because he did not have the required majority. Attempts to form a government of Democrats and technocrats supported by Ecevit's party apparently foundered, or failed to gain Koruturk's approval.

Koruturk had been reluctant to name Demirel, in part because he believes that the inclusion of two irresponsible, extreme rightist parties would soon lead to a breakdown of the government. These parties are also a red flag to leftists, and their presence in the government might spark renewed outbreaks of violence. This would arouse uneasiness among the military, which ousted Demirel in 1971 and have remained strongly opposed to him.

The Nationalist Front would probably be more uncompromising on Cyprus. Such a stand would also antagonize the armed forces, inasmuch as the military, still hoping that US military assistance will be renewed, reportedly recognize the need to show progress in the negotiations.

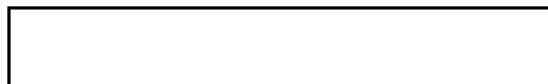
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